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Following detailed discussions with Railtrack's weather working group, the Met Office this week launched a new improved weather service which could help reduce delays and disruptions on the railways caused by extreme weather conditions.

The Met Office has consolidated its forecast production for the national rail system at the Met Office, Birmingham. A dedicated team of weather forecasting experts for the rail industry has spent the past year in dialogue with Railtrack assessing the requirements of Railtrack's control centres.

The result is a new look service that's easier to use, allowing operators at Railtrack to make informed decisions and provide a reliable and speedy response in the event of weather incidents.

Key improvements to the service include:

- The Met Office's 32 standard OpenRail areas are now being used in place of Railtrack's 23 forecast areas - to give better meteorological coverage
- Revised format for local-area forecasts to make hazards easier to spot - so that operators in busy control centres can see at a glance if there are any significant weather hazards likely to affect operations in that area in the next 24 hours
- The introduction of additional winter hazard warnings - such as low temperatures (triggered on an air temperature of -5 ºC) and 'icedays' (when air temperatures remain below 0 ºC all day). This gives advanced warning to Railtrack and train operators to implement winter procedures, to prevent the freezing up of on-board train equipment, whereas previously there was no easy trigger to alert them that these actions should be taken
- Forecasting according to Railtrack's ice and snow categories - Railtrack and the train operators have actions that have to be taken depending on the severity of the weather. Previously the control room staff had to determine the category from the information supplied, but now the Met Office provides the data in that form - such as SNOW2 - which means that some areas may become overwhelmed and will have to resort to an emergency timetable, or FROST2, which means that while switch heating can be relied upon, high risk locations may need to be visited by infrastructure staff
- Introduction of an outlook to give guidance on hazards expected up to four days ahead, allowing operators to plan accordingly.

The National Weather Group, which includes representatives from each of the Railtrack zones and Railtrack HQ, ensure that best practice is rolled out across the country.

Nick Layt from the Met Office endorses Railtrack's approach to weather management: "We have created a business partnership, where the Met Office worries about the weather, leaving Railtrack to get on with running the railways. Through constant dialogue we are able to provide whatever they need, and are constantly liaising with the National Weather Group at Railtrack to find out further forecasting requirements, helping them get ahead of the weather, to reduce disruption as much as possible".

The Met Office is also putting together a training package for Railtrack control and operations staff. It will give them a better appreciation of what forecasts mean and how they are produced, and is similar to courses held for highways customers, which have been a great success.

Last year, Railtrack Scotland implemented a management team comprising Railtrack, ScotRail, and First Engineering, working closely with the Met Office, to understand how weather forecast information can improve management of the rail infrastructure.

Two briefing booklets were produced - one for autumn and one for winter, giving general information to all personnel in the rail industry to help them understand in part the effects of weather on railway infrastructure and the range of tools available to mitigate. Work will continue through the year to build on the lessons learned and successes of autumn and winter 2000.

In recognition of Scotland having more-severe weather than the rest of the UK, Railtrack Scotland has a dedicated weather team who work closely with local Met Office forecasters based in Glasgow.

Says Lynne Docherty from Railtrack: "This new forecast will be another step forward in managing the effects of weather on the rail infrastructure. We are making a great deal of effort to look forward in the rail industry, and over the coming months will be monitoring the use of this information and its role in decision-making processes. The Weather Team, as part of Performance Strategy, will continue to work with the Met Office towards a better understanding of how weather affects the infrastructure in Scotland Zone."

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